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Review of *The Last Laugh: A New Philosophy Of
Near-Death Experiences, Apparitions, And The
Paranormal* by Raymond A. Moody Jr.

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THE LAST LAUGH: A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES, APPARITIONS, AND THE PARANORMAL by Raymond A. Moody, Jr. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 1999. Pp. 196 + xvii. \$12.95 (paperback). ISBN 1-57174-106-2.

This is a strange book. Raymond Moody, a medical doctor with a doctorate in philosophy, is the author of *Life After Life*, *Reflections on Life After Life*, and *The Light Beyond*, accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) that became best-sellers during the last few decades and gave impetus to a rash of books and articles and TV specials on the subject. In *Life After Life*, he analyzed some possible medical explanations for the NDE and indicated that they were unsatisfactory, so the experience fell into the category of the "paranormal." Judging from the subtitle of *The Last Laugh*, the reader might expect to find some reflections on the philosophical implications of NDEs—how to verify them, how to differentiate them from delusions and dreaming, how they relate to the mind-body relationship, and so on. But this is not what the book is about. This book is bitter and sarcastic, and in a way is an attempt to retract the import of his first book by putting it into a separate and arcane category.

Throughout the book, Moody rails at three classes of "experts" on NDEs: the skeptics, Christian fundamentalists, and parapsychologists. Each of these classes is denigrated. The skeptics are, for example, the writers for the journal *The Skeptical Inquirer*, who in every issue expose and lambast various claims for ESP, psychokinesis, NDEs, miracles, visions, and so forth. According to Moody, they claim to be scientists exposing pseudo-scientists, but in reality they are ideologues embracing the quasi-religion of scientism, the position that nothing is credible unless it can be verified by scientific method. These are the "sigh-cops," the border-guardians of normality whose chosen vocation is to exclude all claims of psi. Moody reserves his most intense disgust for the Christian fundamentalists, the "funda-Christians," who get themselves into a frenzy shouting "JAY-zus!" while interpreting NDEs as diabolical, and the "being of light" seen by experiencers as Satan himself. When he gets to the parapsychologists, Moody uses a very wide brush indeed. Who does he have in mind? The psychologists at laboratories in universities and institutes who use technical apparatus to test selected subjects for clairvoyance, telepathy, psychokinesis? Or psychologists like Kenneth Ring, who uses standard factoring methods for classifying NDEers in terms of gender, religious background, age, and other variables? Moody does not say. He vaguely accuses this group of claiming "the scientific knowledge of that which lies beyond scientific knowledge"—as if as a scientist one must limit oneself only to that which one knows beforehand to be scientifically knowable.

Moody's answer to such serious misunderstandings of the paranormal is to be a "playful paranormalist"—a term which he repeats hundreds of times in this eclectic and repetitious book, pointedly contrasting this position with

those who take the paranormal too seriously. The book is filled with illustrations ancient and modern of how the paranormal has been a continuing form of entertainment. But Moody himself ends up on the side of reductionistic scientism, because he tries to reduce everything to a "nothing but"—all manifestations of the paranormal are nothing but means of entertainment and can only be understood by good-humored persons.

Moody thus tries to supply the proper context for understanding the paranormal (only a few pages in the book are specifically concerned with NDEs). As an example of a proper approach to his theory of "NDEntertainment," he cites his invention of an "apparition chamber," built to induce experiences of communication with departed friends or relatives.

The proper context for Moody's *writing* of this book, however, seems to be a combination of the ongoing interest he mentions in the philosophy of humor and the fact that he is unwillingly categorized by the public as an expert serious about NDEs and open to the possibility that they can give us information about a possible "life after life." He blames his original editors for giving that misleading impression by cutting out some disclaimer pages from *Life After Life*. By reducing the NDEs experience to a big joke, Moody in effect retracts the significance of the book that made him wealthy and gets the last laugh on the reader who buys his latest book expecting to see a serious philosophical analysis of NDEs. I conclude that Moody feels he has lost his respectability as an intellectual by the vast popularity of his first book and is trying to regain it now by saying, "Hey, I really don't believe that stuff. Let me explain . . ."

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